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Commanding the Truth

A Narrative Reading of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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Abstract

Title: *Commanding the Truth: A Narrative Reading of Ian McEwan's "Atonement"*

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Abstract: The tension between truth and fiction is central in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, since the main character, Briony, turns out to be both the narrating I and the experiencing I. The aim of this essay is to find out how it is possible for Briony to be both author and character. I use the theory of narratology as described by Manfred Jahn to look at some of the devices Briony uses to tell her own story. I also compare the difference between the first and the second reading, because I argue that once you know that Briony is the actual narrator, she becomes more overt. The main result is that being the narrator of as well as the character in her own story is the only way for Briony to command the truth.

Keywords: Commanding the truth, truth and fiction, Briony, *Atonement*, Ian McEwan, narratology, Manfred Jahn, narrating I, experiencing I, focalization

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Introduction	1
“No One Will Care”	1
Thesis	1
Summary of the Novel	2
Background and Theory	3
Outline	4
Part One	5
The Play: The Trials of Briony	5
The Character: “The Controlling Demon”	6
The Crime: “The Truth Was in the Symmetry”	8
From Character to Narrator: “A Conflict of Interest”	10
Part Two	12
The “Awareness of an Audience”	12
Narrative Distance	12
The Narrator: Avoiding “Ordinary Human Limitations”	14
Focalization	15
Traces of Briony	16
Conclusion	20
Works Cited	21

Introduction

“No One Will Care”

“When I am dead, and the Marshalls are dead, and the novel is finally published, we will only exist as my inventions... No one will care what events and which individuals were misrepresented to make a novel” (McEwan 371).

Fortunately for Briony Tallis, the main character who claims the above about the novel she has just finished, I do care about misrepresented events and individuals. *Atonement* ends in a surprising way, which makes the second reading of the novel very different from the first. Once you learn how the story ends, you get a whole new perspective on things, which will undoubtedly affect how you look at the characters when you reencounter them. Pilar Hidalgo also cares: in an article she calls the novel an “exploration between what is real and what is imagined”, which is an excellent way to sum up one of the major themes (83).

There are many tensions in *Atonement*: not only the obvious ones between right and wrong, good and evil, guilt and innocence etc. These tensions are visible even to the first-time reader. The tension between truth and fiction is central, which can be seen as a tension between the two Brionys: the narrating I and the experiencing I. During the second reading of the novel, it is clear how Briony’s controlling side is contrasted with her attention-seeking one; how her wish to atone does not go hand in hand with her wish to manipulate the outcome of things; how her wish to be honest stands against her desire to “command the truth” (McEwan 168). I would like to take a closer look at this tension from a narratological perspective.

Thesis

Already as a child, Briony has a strong wish for order and control. Writing allows her to create a world where she can manipulate both the characters and the outcome of things. Being an only and sometimes lonely child, Briony is attention-seeking. Both her wish to be in charge and her need for attention are mirrored in the play *The Trials of Arabella* with which the novel starts: not only is Briony the playwright, but she also wants the main part of Arabella.

Briony’s obsession with order and control makes her commit a crime because “the truth was in the symmetry” and because she wants to command the truth (McEwan 169). Her attempt to atone for the crime takes the form of a novel mirroring the play: Briony is the narrator as well

as the main character. I argue that because Briony is both the narrating and the experiencing I in *Atonement* she is able to command the truth, and at the same time unable to distinguish between truth and fiction. The aim of this essay is to show the tension between what is real and what is invented, and to discuss some of the narrative devices that make it possible for Briony to be both narrator and character; both playwright and leading lady.

Summary of the Novel

Atonement is divided into parts One, Two, and Three, and a short coda, “London 1999”. Part One takes place on a hot June day in 1935 during which thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis experiences a number of events that will make her commit a crime. Her older brother Leon is visiting from London with a friend, Paul Marshall; her older sister Cecilia has just returned home from Cambridge and so has Robbie Turner, their childhood friend and son of the Tallis’ cleaning lady. Visiting are also the “cousins from the north”, nine-year-old twins Pierrot and Jackson, and their fifteen-year-old sister Lola (McEwan 8).

Briony has written a play to celebrate Leon’s return, and starts rehearsing with her cousins. However, the play is never performed. Cecilia and Robbie experience a growing attraction for each other, which puzzles both them and Briony, who sees her sister – in Robbie’s presence – strip off her clothes and dive into the fountain to retrieve the pieces of a broken vase. Briony’s confusion grows as she reads a sexually explicit letter from Robbie to Cecilia and later walks in on them making love in the library. Her over-imaginative mind starts portraying her childhood friend as a “maniac” – a term Lola presents her with (McEwan 119). Later in the evening, the twins run away, and in the search for them, Lola is attacked. Briony sees a man run away, and (for various reasons which will be discussed later) names Lola’s rapist as Robbie.

Part Two takes place five years later and describes, through Robbie’s eyes, the retreat of the British forces to Dunkirk. Robbie has been in prison since Briony’s false accusation and is now a soldier. We learn that Cecilia, convinced that Robbie is innocent, has estranged herself from her family and started working as a nurse. She and Robbie keep in touch through letters.

Part Three takes place at a London hospital the same year. This part is written from Briony’s perspective. She is now a nurse, taking care of wounded soldiers. She is sorry for accusing Robbie and goes to see Cecilia to apologize for what she has done.

In the coda, we learn that the previous three parts are the work of Briony's imagination – *Atonement* is her novel, a life-long attempt to make amends for a crime she committed in 1935.

Background and Theory

As stated in the first section, the second-time reader of *Atonement* has information that will shed new light on characters and perspectives. Knowing that Briony is the narrator forces the reader to re-evaluate his/her ideas about guilt, (mis)perception, and truth. Brian Finney writes that the novel has been very well received and that the few reviewers who do not like it object to “the final coda as an instance of postmodern gimmickry” (1). The difference between the first and the second reading is the core of this essay, and I believe the final twist of revealing the identity of the actual narrator is what makes the novel worth re-reading.

To discuss the tension between the narrating I and the experiencing I, I will be using terms from Manfred Jahn's “Narratology: A Guide to the Theory of Narrative”.¹ Narratology is a theory mainly concerned with the telling of the story – the narration. I will use only a very small selection of narratological terms and focus on narrator, experiencer, narrative situation, and focalization, all of which are connected to the fact that Briony is telling her own story. As Finney mentions, *Atonement* has “frequent use of narrative anticipation, or...temporal prolepsis” (3). In the last section before the conclusion, I discuss how and where prolepsis as well as little traces of Briony can be seen in the text. I want to communicate the difference between the first and the second reading, and while the use of prolepsis is visible even to the first-time reader, the traces of Briony can only be seen once you know that she is the narrator.

According to Finney, “[n]arration is an act of interpretation. Interpretation opens the possibility of misinterpretation...” (4). As mentioned in the introduction, there are many examples of misinterpretation in *Atonement*. My standpoint is that they are intentional and a result of how Briony uses her narrative powers.

¹ According to Jahn's wish, I have used paragraph references (e.g. N3.1) instead of page numbers when quoting. For other quotes and references I have used the MLA 2009 system.

Outline

The body of this essay is divided into two main parts: simply Part One and Part Two, as a little wave to McEwan. The first one is about the character Briony, the experiencing I. Here, I write about the crime Briony commits and the events leading up to it; the play that mirrors her wish to be both author and character; and how she is characterized as a girl obsessed with order and control. Lastly, I show how and where Briony goes from character to narrator, as the second part is about the narrating I. Using narratology, I discuss the narrative devices Briony uses to be both inside and outside her story, and thereby “command the truth”. Following the above discussion is a summary of the main points of the essay together with a conclusion.

Part One

The Play: The Trials of Briony

From the beginning of *Atonement* it is clear that Briony, at age thirteen, does not separate fiction and truth. “[H]er powerful imagination works to confuse the real with the fictive” (Finney 3). The tension between the two is present throughout the novel, and is for instance manifested as Briony’s desire to be both playwright and leading lady. Or, as Finney puts it, “[the play frames] the narrative as well as crudely anticipating the action” (2). One could argue that what starts out as *The Trials of Arabella* becomes the trials of Briony. This gives the story several layers, but it also causes difficulties. Gemma López Sánchez writes in an article that Briony has a “fantasy of herself as both author and heroine of her story” and continues to explain that this makes her manipulative, which will have serious consequences for everyone involved, including herself (101). I will later return to what these consequences are, and how being both author and heroine may prove to be the solution for Briony. Firstly, though, I would like to take a closer look at the play with which the novel starts, as I argue that the circumstances around it contribute to inducing Briony’s crime.

Briony’s play *The Trials of Arabella* is her first attempt at writing drama. Still, in her eyes, it is her masterpiece, composed to celebrate her beloved brother Leon’s return. Chapter one of Part One almost exclusively concerns the play, which is “written...in a two-day tempest of composition, causing [Briony] to miss a breakfast and a lunch” (McEwan 3). That the play is allowed so much space shows how, at that time, it is everything to Briony. The incipit characterizes Briony through the play. Finney has noticed the same thing: “...we meet an instance of Briony’s literary imagination before we get to know her as a personality. She is an author first...” (1). From the above quotes, we understand that Briony takes her role as playwright very seriously.

Her play was not for her cousins, it was for her brother, to celebrate his return, provoke his admiration and guide him away from his careless succession of girlfriends, towards the right form of wife, the one who would persuade him to return to the countryside, the one who would sweetly request Briony’s services as a bridesmaid. (McEwan 4)

From this quote, we can see that Briony hopes that the moral of her play will make Leon act according to her wish. It is an example of Briony’s inability to separate the imagined from the real: she seems to believe that she has the same power over real people as over her invented characters – just as in her novel later.

Being a playwright is not enough for Briony. She also wants to be the leading lady in the role of Arabella, the heroine. When Lola, Pierrot and Jackson arrive, Briony immediately tells them that “rehearsals [for the play] start in five minutes”, and the reader understands that she sees her cast, not her cousins (McEwan 9). However, once the children are about to begin the rehearsals, Lola, by two years Briony’s senior, wants to play the main character:

[Lola] spoke through a sigh of sadness or resignation. ‘I suppose that because you’re the one who wrote it, you’ll be Arabella...’
‘Oh no,’ Briony said. ‘No. Not at all.’
She said no but she meant yes. Of course she was taking the part of Arabella. [...] because she *was* Arabella. (McEwan 13, original emphasis)

Briony’s desire to be the heroine makes her believe that she and Arabella are one person. In her mind, there is no other possibility. In spite of all her creativity, Briony can be very narrow-minded. Briony is eventually persuaded to give the part to Lola, because “how could she refuse a cousin so far from home whose family life was in ruins?” (McEwan 14). The fact that Lola’s parents are about to divorce does not stop Briony from self-pity, and the following quote is a good example of how Briony, always balancing on the edge between truth and reality, tends to over-dramatize things:

Briony knew her only reasonable choice then would be to run away, to live under hedges, eat berries and speak to no one, and be found by a bearded woodsman one winter’s dawn, curled up at the base of a giant oak, beautiful and dead, and barefoot, or perhaps wearing the ballet pumps with the pink ribbon straps... .
(McEwan 15-16)

This quote clearly shows that Briony wants to be the center of attention. Not getting to play Arabella, she immediately casts herself as another kind of heroine, a martyr rejected by her own mother, beautiful even when she is dead. It may be argued that these are just the thoughts of a teenager with a vivid imagination. However, I argue that this tendency to be too dramatic will prove to have serious consequences. Had Briony been able to play Arabella at Leon’s return, she would have gotten her fifteen minutes of fame and been content. But having failed to get the main part in her play, Briony will later see a chance to become the leading lady in real life, when her inability to separate fiction from truth will make her accuse an innocent man of rape.

The Character: “The Controlling Demon”

Briony’s desire for control and attention is typical of how she is characterized: she wants to be both playwright and leading lady. Another feature typical of her character is the obsession

with order and symmetry. It is stated in the beginning of the story that Briony “was one of those children possessed to have the world just so” and while Cecilia’s room is very messy, “Briony’s [is] a shrine to her controlling demon” as well as “the only tidy upstairs room in the house” (McEwan 4-5). The reader also learns that even though Briony has a passion for secrets, she has none of her own. “Her wish for a harmonious, organised world denied her the reckless possibility of wrongdoing. Mayhem and destruction were too chaotic for her tastes, and she did not have it in her to be cruel” (McEwan 5). However, Briony will soon – and because of her “controlling demon” – commit a crime that not only contradicts the above quote, but that will also be her secret for many years. Before going further into that matter, I will show how Briony’s writing can be tied both to her inability to separate the real world from the fictional, and to her preference of order and control.

One of the reasons why Briony writes is because she is lonely. With her father and brother working in London, her sister away at Cambridge, and her mother suffering from repeated migraines, she has an “effective status as an only child” (McEwan 5). Her only company in the big house in the country are the characters in the stories she invents. This causes her to live in an imaginary world, and not having – or being able – to separate that world from the real one. Cathrin Sernham notices this as well, and takes it one step further when noticing in an essay that “[a]ssigning people roles and making them part of her story makes it hard for Briony to see the people around her as real people; instead she tends to see them as the characters she makes them” (3). I agree with Sernham – this is evidence that Briony (perhaps unintentionally at this young age but definitely not later) treats people around her as characters she can manipulate.

Another reason is that writing leaves Briony in charge. As a writer, she is used to being the one making the decisions. The great advantage for her is that she can create the world just like she wants it to be: harmonious and organised. López Sánchez explains how Briony’s wish for order and control is satisfied by her writing:

Briony’s vocation as a writer is related to her need to harmonise the world around her. The act of writing stories encapsulates all her little obsessions in life: a tendency for order and control, an outlet for her fascination with words, and an interest in secrets and the miniaturisation of the world. Stories allow Briony to transform the world at large into a miniature simulacrum that she can arrange, dispose of and, most importantly, manipulate at her own pleasure. All her desires, therefore, can be satisfied through the narrative impulse... . (103)

It is explained in the first chapter that through writing, Briony’s “passion for tidiness was also satisfied, for an unruly world could be made just so...” (McEwan 7). This quote, along with

López Sánchez's explanation, clearly shows how Briony's sense of order and control both induces and shapes her writing.

As mentioned earlier, *The Trials of Arabella* is Briony's "first excursion into drama" (McEwan 7). Briony later regrets not having written a short story for Leon instead of a play. Based on this, López Sánchez claims that Briony has chosen the wrong genre for her narrative, because "through a story, her manipulative desires would have been more successfully satisfied" (104). As we have seen earlier, Briony's hopes of being the leading lady on stage disappear when Lola wants the part of Arabella. Since the play is never performed, Briony will not be praised for her role as playwright either. Keeping in mind the consequences of this – that Briony, with a renewed hope to play the main part, commits a crime – I am inclined to agree with López Sánchez: "the wrong genre has been chosen" (104). However, if we choose to look away from the consequences and just focus on Briony's writing, I would like to argue that the genre of drama suits her. She thinks that "a universe reduced to what was said in it was tidiness indeed", which of course satisfies her wish for neatness (McEwan 7-8). To compensate for the lack of descriptions, "every utterance [in the play] was delivered at the extremity of some feeling or other", which appeals to Briony's preference of the dramatic (McEwan 8). Finally, it is stated that "the piece was intended to inspire not laughter, but terror, relief and instruction" (McEwan 8). This goes hand in hand with the message of the play: "that love which did not build a foundation on good sense was doomed" and reflects Briony's passion for order and correctness (McEwan 3).

It may be argued that there is nothing strange about a lonely teenage girl retreating to fantasy land once in a while. The problem is that, as we will see later on, when the events of the real world cease to be under her control, Briony seems to believe that she can regain control through her (fictional) writing. As an adult, she seems to think that she can make amends for a crime committed in real life through a novel – a story she is both author of and main character in. I believe that Briony's "manipulative desires" will indeed be satisfied: in her life-long writing project that becomes *Atonement*, Briony – now both author and heroine – has all the power she could wish for.

The Crime: "The Truth Was in the Symmetry"

Briony's writing, but also her actions, are connected to her preference for order and symmetry. This is most evident in the actual crime, where Briony falsely accuses Robbie of being Lola's rapist simply because "the truth was in the symmetry" (McEwan 169). *The*

Trials of Arabella play an important part as well. As we have seen earlier, Lola wants to play the favoured part of Arabella, or as Briony puts it, her cousin has “stolen [her] rightful role” (McEwan 37). I will now focus on the crime and show how Briony’s passion for order, the circumstances around the play, her desire to be both author and heroine, and her inability to distinguish fiction from truth all contribute to her false testimony.

In search of the runaway twins Pierrot and Jackson, Briony finds Lola being attacked by a man who, at the sight or sound of Briony, disappears in the dark. Though Lola is unwilling to name her attacker, Briony is soon certain it was Robbie she saw, “not because she has ocular proof but because that interpretation fits the narrative she is scripting on the basis of her earlier encounters with Robbie” (Phelan 328). Thus, a number of circumstances and previous events lead Briony to this conclusion. Earlier the same day she has witnessed Robbie, whom she has known all of her life, in situations she does not understand: first by the fountain and later in the library with Cecilia, where she mistakes him of attacking her sister rather than making love to her – a mistake she makes because she has read Robbie’s letter to Cecilia.

As pointed out earlier, Briony has no secrets of her own and she is rather lonely, which partly explains why she invents little stories. López Sánchez writes that there is no point in drama when “one has a tragic reality of one’s own”, suggesting that Lola, Pierrot, and Jackson’s disinterest in Briony’s play would come from having had enough drama in their parents’ recent divorce (103). This can be turned around and looked at in the context of Briony’s crime. I believe one of the reasons she lies about seeing Robbie is that there is no drama in her life, so she creates some. We have seen that Briony often lives in a fantasy world and tends to over-dramatize things. Her invented stories sometimes include herself as the main character. Her inability to separate the real from the imagined now becomes her (and Robbie’s) enemy: “As far as she was concerned, everything fitted; the terrible present fulfilled the recent past” (McEwan 168). Deprived of her role as leading lady in the invented play, Briony now sees a chance to play the main part in a drama called real life. Or, as López Sánchez puts it, “Briony’s fantasy of herself as a heroine...will be the main reason which will lead her to commit her crime” (106).

Briony seems to feel on some level that she is not entirely certain of her testimony, but she finds comfort in these thoughts:

It was not simply her eyes that told her the truth. It was too dark for that.... Her eyes confirmed the sum of all she knew and had recently experienced. The truth was in the symmetry, which was to say, it was founded in common sense. The truth

instructed her eyes. So when she said, over and again, I saw him, she meant it, and was perfectly honest, as well as passionate. (McEwan 169)

As is evident to the reader, Briony believes that symmetry is the same as common sense, which reflects her strong wish for an orderly world, a “world just so” (McEwan 4). Her passion for order is stronger than her concerns with truth. Phelan remarks: “had she been more interested in realism then, she would have required far more evidence before fingering Robbie” (331). Briony’s desire to be in control makes her unable (or unwilling) to see that real people and real events cannot be manipulated the way invented characters can: “if her poor cousin was not able to command the truth, then she would do it for her” (McEwan 168). One would think that truth cannot be commanded, but in the following I will try to show that perhaps this is possible for Briony.

From Character to Narrator: “A Conflict of Interest”

I argue that Briony is able to command the truth because she is both narrator and character. It is therefore important to look at how Briony represents Briony, or her “own representation of her behavior, since as novelist she clearly has a conflict of interest” (Phelan 330). Having focused on the character Briony, such as she is described in Part One, I would now like to jump to the end of the novel and focus on the passage where Briony goes from being the experiencing I to the narrating I.

On one of the last pages of Part Three is a subtle (but quite clear to the second-time reader) reference to the two Brionys – the narrating and the experiencing. According to Phelan, this passage is “marking the seam between history and fiction” (334). The character Briony, now a trainee nurse at a London hospital during the war, is on her way to see Cecilia and beg her forgiveness for falsely accusing Robbie:

She left the café, and as she walked along the Common she felt the distance widen between her and another self, no less real, who was walking back towards the hospital. Perhaps the Briony who was walking in the direction of Balham [where Cecilia lives] was the imagined or ghostly persona. (McEwan 329)

In the coda, following Part Three, the reader learns that Briony never went to see Cecilia that day. Instead, she “limped back to the hospital, unable to confront her...sister” (McEwan 370). So, the Briony who walks towards Cecilia’s house is very much an “imagined or ghostly persona”. Note that both Brionys are perceived as equally real, “her and another self, no less real”, as this supports my argument that Briony does not distinguish the real from the imagined.

Once the character Briony reaches her sister's house, where she also finds Robbie (who, we are told in the end, died just a few months earlier), she tells them that she wants to change her testimony, upon which Robbie responds that he wants Briony to write him a detailed letter explaining why she lied about seeing him with Lola: "It needs to be a long letter" (McEwan 345). Walking back towards the hospital, Briony "knew what was required of her. Not simply a letter, but a new draft, an atonement" (McEwan 349). In this way, the character Briony becomes the narrator of her own story. Having Robbie and Cecilia ask her to write an account of what happened that hot June day 1935 is a means for McEwan's character/narrator Briony, in her role as an author, to tie her experiencing I to her narrating I.

Part Two

The “Awareness of an Audience”

The title of the novel, *Atonement*, makes the reader expect some kind of confession, which traditionally has a certain amount of honesty. However, Briony’s “orderly spirit” and passion for neatness does not necessarily mean that she is telling the truth – rather, she wishes to command it (McEwan 5). Again, this is a question of control. Phelan writes that “individual narratives...often...establish their own ethical standards in order to guide their audiences to particular ethical judgments” and continues to explain that this can be done through “stylistic choices [and the] use of the narrator” (325). In Jahn’s words, a narrator “is the agent who establishes communicative contact with an addressee... who decides *what* is to be told, *how* it is to be told...and *what is to be left out*” (N.3.1.1, original emphasis). Applied to *Atonement*, “...Briony’s novel has seamlessly combined the historical events of Part One with her mixtures of fact and invention in Parts Two and Three” (Phelan 330). Briony, being the narrator, has the power to decide how to present her story.

According to Jahn, one of the “textual elements” that “project a narrative voice” is “pragmatic signals – expressions that signal the narrator’s awareness of an audience and the degree of his/her orientation towards it” (N.1.4). In the following, I will be using narratological terms as I focus on the narrator Briony’s “awareness of an audience” and how it is marked: by narrative distance, by the choice of narrator and by focalization. These devices allow Briony to be both narrator and character, thus enabling her to command the truth, without having to separate the real from the imagined.

Narrative Distance

According to Jahn, narrative distance is “the temporal and psychological distance between the narrating I and the experiencing I” (N.3.3.2). He also explains that “a narrator who wishes to stay covert will avoid talking about him- or herself” (N.1.9). Before developing the subject of overt/covert, I would like to show some examples of narrative distance and discuss how and why the narrator Briony creates distance between her two selves.

Briony, as narrator of *Atonement*, is not only aware that she has an audience, but also that she has power over it. She uses this power to make the reader believe that the narrator is outside the story rather than in the middle of it. She has chosen to tell her story from a third

person point of view to increase her reliability, as third person narrators traditionally are seen as more reliable than first person ones. Writing in the third person is also a means to create distance between narrator and character as well as between reader and character.

For parts One, Two and Three, Briony writes about herself as “Briony” and “she”. It is only in the coda that she changes to a first person perspective. But as if this were not enough, Briony goes one step further in her attempt to create distance between her narrating I and her experiencing I: when narrator and character come too close to each other, the narrator Briony writes about her narrated self as “the girl”. The following example is from chapter three: Briony is sitting alone in the nursery, feeling sorry for herself because she has been more or less forced to give up the part of Arabella to Lola. Here, Briony’s thoughts are presented in a way that brings her quite close to the reader. These events take place in the minutes before she goes to the nursery window and sees Robbie and Cecilia by the fountain. Because this is such an important scene – it induces her crime – it would be dangerous to continue in this close-up way of narrating, since it might reveal that she is not only experiencer but also narrator. So, to create distance between her two selves, the narrator Briony takes a step back and in the next sentence talks about herself as “the girl” (37).

Another example is from chapter thirteen, where Briony has just named Robbie as Lola’s rapist. Lola is unsure of who her attacker is, and will not say a name. Lola’s uncertainty makes Briony more certain that what she already has decided is true, because it fits with previous events: Robbie is the rapist. Lola says that she “[can’t] say for sure” and Briony immediately responds: “Well I can. And I will” (McEwan 167). The narrator Briony comes very close to her experiencing I when she foreshadows how Lola’s and her respective standpoints will be “pursued as demons in private for many years afterwards” and is therefore forced to create distance by explaining that “Lola did not have to lie, to look her supposed attacker in the eye and summon the courage to accuse him, because all that work was done for her...*by the younger girl*” (McEwan 167-168, my emphasis).

The effect of narrative distance as in the above examples is of course that the narrator stays covert. However, one might also consider a psychological aspect here: Briony wants distance between her two selves because as narrator she is aware that she has committed a crime, and in her attempt to atone for it, she wants to distance herself from the person she once was.

The Narrator: Avoiding “Ordinary Human Limitations”

Typical first-person narrators [are] subject to “ordinary human limitations” (Lanser): [they are] restricted to a personal and subjective point of view; [...] no way of knowing what went on in the minds of other people... It is obvious that a narrator’s handling of these limitations...can tell us a lot about...the motives for telling the story. (Jahn N.1.13)

In the following I will show how Briony, in spite of telling her own story in which she is the main character, avoids “ordinary human limitations”. Since Briony wants to command the truth, she has chosen to tell her story in the way that gives her the most reliability and therefore power: using focalization and a third-person point of view, thereby creating the illusion of being heterodiegetic and covert.

Jahn writes that “it is only when the story itself gets going...that we get into a position to judge whether the narrator is present or absent as an acting character in the story.... Sooner or later, however, a narrator’s relation to his or her story becomes reasonably clear” (N.1.11). In the case of *Atonement*, it is not until the last few pages, the coda, that this relation is clear. Jahn later explains that “the criterial feature of homodiegetic narration is whether the narrator was ever present in the world of his/her story” and continues to say that there are rare cases in which “homodiegetic narrators refer to themselves in the third person” (N.3.1.6). Though not clear to the first-time reader until the end of the novel, this is what Briony does.

According to Jahn, “a homodiegetic narrator always tells a story of *personal experience*, whereas a heterodiegetic narrator tells a story about *other* people’s experiences” (N.1.13, original emphasis). Briony’s story is indeed “of personal experience”, but admitting that to her reader would limit her power, as it would make her less reliable. As a heterodiegetic narrator with “a position outside the world of the story”, she has the possibility to manipulate the story as she pleases because, as Jahn puts it, “heterodiegetic narrators typically assume the power of omniscience...as if this were the most natural thing in the world” which, according to Jahn, readers tend to accept (N.1.15).

Jahn explains that “a narrator who wishes to stay covert will avoid talking about him- or herself” and that the ultimate solution is for the narrator to “hide behind someone” (N.1.9). Briony creates the illusion of being a covert narrator because even though she talks about herself, it is only in the third person so that the reader does not understand that the text is an autodiegetic narrative – “a special case of homodiegetic narration...in which the narrator is the protagonist of his or her story” (Jahn N.3.1.6). To further increase the illusion of covertness, the narrator Briony hides behind “someone” – namely her character self. The narrating I hides behind the experiencing I.

In his article, Jahn outlines some different kinds of narrative situations as described by Stanzel: first-person narrative, authorial narrative and figural narrative. The narrator Briony acts the part of an authorial narrator (i.e. outside of the story) as well as trying to give the impression of her story being a figural narrative (i.e. “a story as if seeing it through the eyes of a character”) (N.3.3.1). However, once you are familiar with the text, *Atonement* has all the qualities of first-person narration, except that it is told mostly in the third person. Jahn writes about authorial narration that “often, the authorial narrator’s status of an outsider makes her/him an authority commanding [remember, Briony wants to command the truth!] practically godlike abilities such as omniscience and omnipresence” (N.3.5.5). So, it is clever of the narrator Briony to create the illusion that her story is an authorial narrative, since this increases her reliability. Because she appears to be outside of the story, the reader will automatically assume that she gives a more objective account, when in fact, her account is nothing but subjective. Or, to paraphrase McEwan, she has an “effective status” as a heterodiegetic narrator (5).

Focalization

Again, all distinct voice-indicating emotional expressions will attach more plausibly to the internal focalizer than to the narrator. [...] Ultimately, we can say very little about the narrator’s voice because the narrator effectively hides...behind the presentation of the internal focalizer’s voice (and perception and consciousness). One could also say [she] hides [her] voice by imitating the character’s voice. (Jahn N.1.26)

As shown in the previous section, the narrator Briony aims for covert narration, which in Jahn’s words “can be most easily achieved by letting the action be seen through the eyes of an internal focalizer” (N.3.1.4).

There are several kinds of focalization, such as internal and external. Briony as narrator uses the technique of internal focalization, since the events in the novel are seen from the point of view of the characters in it (N.1.18). However, McEwan’s character Briony in her role as author is an external focalizer, as everything we read in parts One, Two, and Three is filtered through her mind and pen. The narrator Briony also makes use of variable focalization, which in Jahn’s words is “the presentation of different episodes of the story as seen through the eyes of several focalizers” as well as multiple focalization, which is “a technique of presenting an episode repeatedly, each time seen through the eyes of a different (internal) focalizer” (N.3.2.4). Variable focalization is represented in most of the novel, since

there are several focalizers. Chapter one has Briony's point of view, two has Cecilia's and six has their mother Emily's. A good example of multiple focalization is the fountain scene, which is presented in chapters two, three and eight respectively from Cecilia's, Briony's and Robbie's point of view.

However, focalization is not just a means for Briony to deceive her reader. It can also work in the opposite way, making the reader "aware of the perils of perception" (Hidalgo 86). In other words, because the reader is presented with several versions of one event, there is no saying whose account of e.g. what happened by the fountain, is the truest. And according to Peter Mathews, the use of focalization is a way for McEwan to "alert the reader that the objectivity of the narrative voice is deeply suspect" (152).

One could argue that the use of focalization is a step in Briony's attempt to achieve atonement. By trying to understand how Robbie, Cecilia and even Emily could have thought, felt and acted and thereby allowing them to tell parts of the story, could be seen as an unselfish act on Briony's part, which would make the use of focalization part of the atonement. This suggests that Briony tries to be as honest as possible. In the coda we learn that Briony has done a lot of research in order to be able to correctly describe events that she did not witness herself, such as Robbie's hardships in the war. However, the seventy-seven-year-old Briony claims in the coda that she worked in three different hospitals but merged them into one for the story, "A convenient distortion, and the least of my offences against veracity", and later says "If I really cared so much about facts, I should have written a different kind of book" (McEwan 356, 360). This is evidence that Briony is neither honest nor objective, and supports my claim that she wants to command the truth.

Traces of Briony

Having explained the concept of focalization and its presence in *Atonement*, I would like to finish my argumentation by a look at the difference between the first and the second (or more) reading of the novel, and provide some examples of traces of the narrator and prolepsis. Jahn explains that "[b]ecause the narrator's discourse will preferably mimic the focalizer's perceptions and conceptualizations the narrator's own voice quality will remain largely indistinct. One of the main effects of internal focalization is to attract attention *to* the mind of the reflector-character and *away* from the narrator..." (N.1.18, original emphasis). As we have seen, Briony wants to appear as a covert narrator. However, I believe she becomes more overt the more times you read the novel. In other words, even though the narrator, through

focalization, is supposed to mirror what the characters in her story think and feel, there are places where she shines through, where her own voice is quite distinct.

In chapter two, Cecilia thinks about why she still has not moved away from home. One of her reasons for staying is said to be that “lingering here, bored and comfortable, was a form of self-punishment tinged with pleasure, or the expectation of it; if she went away something bad might happen or, worse, something good, something she could not afford to miss” (McEwan 22). It is characteristic of Briony, rather than Cecilia, to see life in dramatic black and white like this; it sounds like her voice rather than her sister’s. This quote is also a prolepsis: something bad will happen, but before that, something good – Cecilia and Robbie realizing they are in love.

The chapter ends with the fountain scene seen from Cecilia’s point of view. When she dives into the water to retrieve the piece that came off the vase, her thoughts concern Robbie’s punishment for breaking it:

Denying his help [to retrieve the piece], any possibility of making amends, was his punishment. The unexpectedly freezing water that caused her to gasp was his punishment. She held her breath, and sank, leaving her hair fanned out across the surface. Drowning herself would be his punishment.” (McEwan 30)

I believe it is much more characteristic of Briony, with her strong sense of right and wrong, to think in terms of punishment. Briony’s overly dramatic side shines through when she has Cecilia think that she would drown herself. Compare with the quote where Briony imagines herself running away from home and ending up “dead and beautiful” under a tree, it is evident that Cecilia’s thoughts are more characteristic of Briony.

There are also places where Briony’s obsession with order and control shows. In chapter four, Cecilia (again the focalizer), finds Briony, who has given up the hope of her play being performed, tearing down the poster and destroying the ticket booth. Cecilia wants to comfort Briony with “stroking and soothing murmurs”, which is believable (McEwan 44). However, there is a clear trace of Briony as Cecilia’s thoughts continue: “Addressing Briony’s problems with kind words and caresses would have *restored a sense of control*” (McEwan 44, my emphasis). I do not think it is plausible that anyone but Briony – let alone the messy Cecilia – would think of control as something consoling. Thus, the narrator Briony is visible in Cecilia’s mind.

In the same chapter, the narrator wants us to believe that Cecilia has the following thought: “not everything people did could be in a correct, logical order” (McEwan 23). We have already seen that of the two sisters, Briony is the one who is obsessed with order and

control, whereas Cecilia is described as somewhat messy. Therefore I draw the conclusion that this thought is Briony showing in a place where she pretends to assume Cecilia's mind.

The way the novel is structured so that it starts and ends with the play – very neat and a full circle, so to speak – is to me evidence of how Briony, even as an old woman, wants order. The use of the vase as a symbol for the lovers, including letting one of the servants accidentally break it at about the same time that both Robbie and Cecilia die in the war, also reflects Briony's passion for neatness and her need for everything to add up.

There are plenty of things that the first-time reader will perceive differently than the one who is familiar with the identity of the narrator. An example is from chapter three, in which the character Briony sits on the nursery floor thinking that "her hand in her lap appeared unusually large and at the same time remote, as though viewed across an immense distance" (McEwan 35). Not noticeable at the first but quite clear at the second reading, the "immense distance" is sixty-four years (1935-1999).

In chapter four, Cecilia thinks that "all day long, she realised, she had been feeling strange, and seeing strangely, *as though everything was already long in the past, made more vivid by posthumous ironies* she could not quite grasp" (McEwan 48, my emphasis). Here, the narrator Briony lets Cecilia be affected by the fact that she is only a character in story written many years later. The extra twist is the word "posthumous". The second-time reader of course knows that Briony's novel will not be published until after her own death as well as the deaths of Lola and Paul Marshall. So, this one word, "posthumous", suggests that Briony is dead and that the novel has finally been published – a clear trace of the narrator.

Later in the same chapter, Cecilia is angry with Leon for inviting Robbie to dinner. Leon, who is unaware of the growing tension and attraction between Cecilia and Robbie, says he will not retract the invitation, which has Cecilia think:

There was nothing she could do.... [A]gain she felt it: it had happened a long time ago, and all outcomes, on all scales – from the tiniest to the most colossal – were already in place. Whatever happened in the future... would also have an unsurprising, familiar quality, inviting her to say, but only to herself, Oh yes, of course. That. I should have known. (McEwan 53)

The prolepsis in this quote is that Cecilia's thoughts mirror what will happen later that evening: she will understand her attraction for Robbie (and his for her) which will cause her to think "*Of course, of course....* It was clear to her now" (McEwan 111, original emphasis). There is also an allusion to the narrator of the story who (in 1999) recounts what happened "a long time ago" (in 1935), which of course means that "all outcomes...were already in place".

In the end of Part Two, Robbie – now a soldier in the war – is very sick and therefore delirious. His friend tells him to be quiet and Robbie responds: “I promise, you won’t hear another word from me” (McEwan 265). The second-time reader knows that Robbie dies from his disease, so his words are a hint that he will stop talking – forever. However, the prolepsis is not very clear to the first-time reader. Phelan notices this too: “...in retrospect we can see that [this] is a subtle preparation for the revelation that Robbie did not survive the retreat [from Dunkirk]” (334).

The effect of prolepsis as well as the traces of Briony is that the narrator’s voice becomes clearer. At the first reading, the narrator seemed covert; at the second reading she becomes more overt. Jahn writes that normally, “overtiness and covertness vary in inverse proportion such that the presence of one is the indication of the absence of the other” (N.3.1.4). However, as we have just seen, this is not the case in *Atonement*. Briony tries to appear as a covert narrator, but at the second (or more) reading of the novel, she is revealed. Since she is both the narrating I and the experiencing I, this means that narrator and character – in spite of Briony’s efforts to keep them apart – come closer together.

Conclusion

The tension between truth and fiction in *Atonement* is manifested as Briony being both character and narrator. I have examined this tension by discussing some of the narratological devices she uses to be able to tell her own story. First, I showed how Briony's love of writing is tied to her strong wish for order and control as well as to her wish for attention, and how this leads to her falsely accusing Robbie of raping Lola. I then went on to pointing at the place in the novel where Briony is transformed from character to narrator. In the second part of the essay I have used narratological terms to show that the way Briony tells her story is connected to her "controlling demon": she has chosen the narrative voice that gives her the most power.

Part of my aim with this essay was also to compare the difference between the first and the second reading of *Atonement*. Once you know that Briony is the narrator, she becomes more and more overt. The use of prolepsis is visible even to the (attentive) first-time reader, whereas the little traces of Briony, of which I have provided examples, are noticeable only for those who know the identity of the narrator.

In the coda it is revealed that Briony is suffering from vascular dementia and will gradually lose her memory. We also learn that the novel cannot be published until Briony herself, Lola and Paul Marshall are dead. López Sánchez writes that "[t]hrough loss of memory, her ending will not be decided by her absolute power as an author" (112). I disagree. I am certain it is just so; this is just another clever way in which Briony uses her authorial power. Her novel is written to appear as nonfictional, and I do not see why anyone would question her reliability. Nevertheless, Briony is obsessed with control, so she conveniently gets dementia, and makes sure her novel is not published until the people who may claim there is another truth (including herself) are gone, admitting that when "the novel is finally published, we will only exist as my inventions" (McEwan 371).ⁱ

Hermione Lee asks in a review of *Atonement* if "the imagined and the real [can] ever be 'at one'?" (1). A yes to her question would be to remove the tension between truth and fiction. Yet I believe they are "at one" in Briony's story. She seems to believe she can change past events through fiction or, as Phelan puts it, her novel is "an attempt to do in art what she failed to do in life" (335). Her childhood dream of being the playwright as well as the leading lady is fulfilled. As narrator of and character in her own story, she has all the power she could wish for. Briony is finally commanding the truth.

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ⁱ I have only established that Briony, by using different narratological devices, commands the truth, and explored *how* it is possible for her to do so. To follow up on my thesis, it would be interesting to look further into ethical and psychological aspects: *why* does she command the truth? One could then take a closer look at the question of guilt and innocence, e.g. if Briony can be said to take responsibility for her actions, and if she is guilty in her own eyes. One could also argue for or against the genuineness of her attempt at atonement: does it change her and if yes, how? Does she ever achieve atonement?